

ANDRÁS TARNÓC

CHARLES SELLERS, NEIL MCMILLEN, AND HENRY
MAY: *AZ EGYESÜLT ÁLLAMOK TÖRTÉNETE*
Budapest: Maecenas Kiadó, 1995. 434 pp.

I

The global disintegration of communism, symbolized by the fall of the infamous Berlin Wall in 1989, not only created new premises for the geopolitical equation, but dramatically altered the cultural and educational sphere of Eastern and Central Europe. As nations heretofore regarded as friends fell by the wayside a new era of intended partnership with the West and the United States was ushered in.

The history of the United States, a topic heretofore superficially treated by most textbooks, became a subject of intense, ideology free scholarly interest. Peter Hahner's translation of Charles Sellers, Henry May, and Neil R. McMillen's *A Synopsis of American History* attempts to respond to the above demand.

II

According to Paul Weiss "men turn to history primarily to learn three truths—how men have changed, what makes men change, and what men are, despite all change." Although such expectations from a narrative history might appear preposterous, the book at hand yields

itself to such interpretation. While the United States is readily identified with such clichés as a “protean nation,” or a “country of continuous change,” its history displays distinct developmental trends.

The beginning colonial status was followed by independence, the achievement of nationhood, the entrance into the ranks of colonial powers, and the elevation to superpower level. While retracing these steps Sellers, McMillen, and May’s work searches for the roots of change. Despite the authors’ warning against the trap of periodization and their emphasis on the continuity of the historical process the different stages of American history offer an explanation for the above changes.

The authors assert that America’s break from colonial status was facilitated by the beneficial effects of the Navigation Acts, the whiggism-driven political regeneration of the colonies, the British practice of “salutary neglect,” and the notion of British constitutionalism. Furthermore, a budding national identity, and traces of common thinking, thereby national self-identification existed in the pre-revolutionary period (52). While the American nation was forged in two wars of independence: the American Revolution and War of Independence (1775—1783) and the War of 1812 (1812—1814), the authors underestimate the role of the Constitutional Convention. The American Industrial Revolution, and political and economic unity achieved through the Civil War and the Reconstruction paved the way toward the American Empire culminating in the achievement of superpower status after 1945.

The book also highlights the changes of the American character, searching for the answer to Crèvecoeur’s question, “What then is the American, this new man?” The colonized American is personified by the French traveller’s “American Farmer” as a product of the melting pot, “a new race of men,” whose ethnicity-driven cultural and political preferences give way to economic and cultural independence buttressed by an optimistic interpretation of the ideas of the Enlightenment. Benjamin Franklin, the wizened statesman preferring “mobility over nobility” embodies the American as a political actor in

the pre-revolutionary period. James Madison, whose careful research of the political heritage of the Western and Eastern Hemisphere culminated in his leading role at the Constitutional Convention, is the embodiment of America's intellectual independence. Alexander Hamilton's aggressive economic and John Marshall's consistent judicial nationalism represent America at the threshold of nationhood. Lincoln's recognition of the "house divided" not only symbolizes the nation tormented by the dilemma of slavery, but functions as the personification of the national will during the turbulence of the Civil War. Theodore Roosevelt is the visionary president whose conviction and aggressive belief in the New Manifest Destiny laid the foundation of the American Empire. In the twentieth century Woodrow Wilson's missionary zeal and Franklin Delano Roosevelt's healing power enhanced the American ideal. Following the achievement of superpower status in the post 1945 era, John F. Kennedy's reach for the New Frontier personified the confident American whose bearings were shaken during the following decades and were not regained until Ronald Reagan's optimism-driven presidency.

Although this approach is susceptible to the trap of the now virtually discredited "top to bottom view" of history, the fact is that no other nation expects its leader to function as opinion maker and barometer of the contemporary social climate to an extent demonstrated by American history. As Skotheim argues no historian operates in a vacuum as his or her work is influenced by the "climate of opinion: the fundamental assumptions and attitudes shared by significant elements of the population at a given time." Sellers, McMillen, and May's work seems to have been unaffected by the notion of multiculturalism, the dominant cultural trend of the 1990's promoting equal recognition for all cultures comprising America's ethnic tapestry. Consequently, the achievements of non-white Americans are relegated to a side-show in this Anglo history dominated narrative.

The book, originally written for the lay or undergraduate public in the U.S., provides an extended outline of American history without

offering profound explanations. As for the Hungarian version, in addition to the accurate translation, the Hungarian explanations of English historical terms are the most valuable. Sellers, McMillen, and May's work achieves its original purpose, the illumination of the process during which the U.S. assumed superpower status. Furthermore, by describing the tumultuous growth of the American democracy Hahner's translation goes a long way in fighting popularly held myths, including the romance surrounding the cowboy and the notion of a solitary, Edison-like inventor propelling the American Industrial Revolution from his workshop.

Unfortunately the volume contains some debatable information as well. While 1619 is indicated as the beginning of slavery in America (19), the infamous Dutch "man o'war" only brought indentured laborers from the Black Continent. The Civil War, a milestone in American history for eliminating slavery, discrediting the states' rights movement, reaffirming the country's political and economic unity, and proving the viability of the Constitution, is branded as a "failure" (198). The Reconstruction, best interpreted by Eric Foner as an "unfinished revolution" is presented as a "tragedy" (197). Furthermore, the work favoring violence over individuality, egalitarianism, and self-reliance as the greatest legacy of the West (217) offers a differing interpretation of Turner's frontier thesis. The authors' estimate of the death toll of World War Two at one million is incorrect compared to the actual figures of 294,000 combat related and 119,000 other deaths noted in George B. Tindall and David F. Shi's *America*.

The publisher is also remiss with information concerning the authors. Charles G. Sellers is a noted historian researching Jacksonian America and issues of historiography. Henry F. May's studies of American intellectual history yielded such works as *The Enlightenment in America* (1958), and *The End of American Innocence. A Study of the First Years of Our Time 1912—1917* (1964).

III

Despite the above shortcomings Hahner's tremendous effort transforming an academic terms-laden, esoteric material into a readable, and at places enjoyable Hungarian text is commendable. The *Az Egyesült Államok Története* offering a glimpse into the tortuous evolution of American democracy not only serves as a catalyst to further study, but invokes the spirit of Colin Goodykoontz arguing that "history has the power along with religion, philosophy, literature, and the arts, to lift the spirit of man as it were to a mountain top from which he can more clearly take his bearings in a time of change and confusion." This book published in a country undergoing its own growing pains of democracy can hardly offer a better consolation to readers mired in the struggle for the realization of the Hungarian Dream.